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JOHN R. TANNER
GOVERNOR OF ILLINOIS
1897—1901

DIED MAY 23, 1901

"He would say: 'Paint me as I am!'"

ORATION BY
HON. ISAAC N. PHILLIPS

AT THE GRAVE
OAK RIDGE CEMETERY, SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS
SUNDAY, MAY 26, 1901



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JOHN R. TANNER.

Friends and Fellow-Citizens:

The immediate family and friends of the man whose body lies here ready for the grave have thought fit that I should speak some words ere we turn from this solemn scene forever. In acceding, with much diffidence, to their request I assume no clerical or religious function. It is not for human impertinence to assume to state the account between this man and his Maker. Nor shall I enter here upon the task of vindicating him from the censures of political critics and enemies. History is writing a just and final judgment upon the work of this man's life, and the true record of his vindication will be read of all men long after the falsehoods of enmity and the clamors of prejudice shall have died away forever.

Nor shall I attempt to gild the memory of our departed friend with the tinsel of soft and meaningless eulogy. He would himself be the last to desire it. He would, if he could speak, exclaim with Cromwell, "Paint me as I am." John R. Tanner was my friend,

“faithful and just to me,” and what I shall say here I shall say not upon the report of others, but upon my own personal knowledge.

To attempt to cheer the drooping spirits of despairing friends were now a hopeless task. We can only say, in commonplace phrase, he has passed to that mysterious realm whither all must go and whence none ever returns. And it was, indeed, no ordinary life, my friends, that here went out upon the pulseless tide of death. John R. Tanner was one of those strong, individual characters such as only a new and free country can produce. Conventionalism did not repress the “noble rage” of his spirit, nor did the formalism and artificiality of social life dwarf and freeze him into the common mold.

When we say this man’s origin was humble we do not mean that his family extraction was vulgar or that his lineage was mean. Neither commercial standards nor the standards of caste and birth have as yet been quite recognized as the proper measures of American manhood. In this free land, thank God! we give fools

their silks and knaves their wine, and still complacently say with Robert Burns, "A man's a man for a' that,"—and sad will it be for our country when we can no longer say it. He who can reckon, as this man could, among his progenitors heroes who have laid down their lives for their country's cause in three American wars, holds a truer patent of nobility than he who traces his lineage to the robber barons of a feudal age.

In the veins of John R. Tanner coursed the fighting blood of a dauntless race. He came from that sturdy middle class which has done nearly all the important work of our American world—the class which has furnished industry its captains, liberty its soldiers and civilization its brightest statesmen. He belonged to the class whose steady and sure advancement marks the true progress of the human race. His early lot was humble; but over this fact we have no cause to grieve. Let us rather rejoice that he had the advantages which are found in the lot of a simple country boy in a new and free land. Let us rejoice

that a life of luxury and pampered ease did not lull him into the repose of inconsequentiality. Despite the fact that nearly all the immortal deeds recorded in American history have been done by men who were once poor and whose early lot was toil, we continue to exclaim in silly astonishment whenever a man who once labored with his hands succeeds in doing great deeds and in achieving distinction. I am glad this man's youth did not feel the palsying touch of great riches. The poverty which denied him learning gave him generous compensations. It imposed upon him the priceless discipline which fits men to be useful. His youth knew the severe struggles, the plain living and the self-denial which generate power and make men strong.

Our departed friend was in life a practical politician of the kind that, it has been said, only become statesmen after death. He did not blink this fact, nor shall I. He publicly, more than once, proclaimed himself a politician and gloried in the title. He was a captain courageous of the caucus and the campaign,

and his career proves that the man who is an effective politician may be, at the same time, an exalted patriot. Cheerfully risking his life for his country in war, John R. Tanner was no less devoted to her cause in peace. He was not only a politician, but he was a politician who succeeded, and who, succeeding, made enemies. He was a born leader of men. The talents he did not possess himself his mastery commanded in others who were glad to serve him. He knew how to pick his soldiers and to assign to each the duty fittest for his hand. He understood human nature and knew how to make friends; and the friends he made were generally steadfast, because he asked of no friend more than he gave in return. In his heart was the genial climate of good-fellowship. On the day of his death he could have called more of the influential men of Illinois by their Christian names than any other man in the state. With keenest vision he peered into the depths of human hearts, and knew where lay the deepest springs of human action.

I have said this man was successful. Had he

failed or proven inefficient in his chosen field, all who have maligned him would have been ready to reward him with the patronizing smile which veils contempt. But by his vast intellectual resources; by his supreme force of character; by his knowledge of men; by that undefined magic which we call magnetism, and by the absolute confidence he inspired in his followers, he arose to a great height of political renown and success, and, of course, those whom he left behind in the race and those who could not use him for their purposes hurled after him the epithets of impotent rage.

“He who ascends to mountain tops shall find
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow;
He who surpasses or subdues mankind
Must look down on the hate of those below.”

But if John R. Tanner was hated by enemies he was in a still greater degree believed in and loved by his friends. They trusted him, and their trust was not in vain. Not being a politician myself, I dare give voice to the seeming paradox that there is no place in the whole field of human activity where absolute good faith is more essential to permanent and final suc-

cess than in party politics. Such a statement is likely to be doubted by those who indulge the "iridescent dream" that the proper way to purify polities is to stand completely outside the sphere of all effective political work and influence, and hurl hot and defamatory adjectives at every man who shows the slightest capacity for producing political results.

John R. Tanner was not "rocked and dangled into power" by fate or fortune. The places he won and the distinction he held were such, only, as his own virile hand seized upon. He fell heir to no political mistakes or accidents. He not only carved his own political fortune from out the unprepared granite of destiny, but by his great sagacity and devotion he made the political fortunes of many others. He worked no less zealously, no less intelligently, for his friends than for himself. In sober truth it may be said that no other public man in Illinois ever gave so unsparingly of his time, his energy and his money for the political promotion of others as John R. Tanner. He was as sleeplessly vigilant when some other man,

though not personally his friend, bore the party standard as when he was himself the candidate.

John R. Tanner was a party man—a republican of republicans—true to the party principles and ever upon the guard-line of party duty. There was not in him one fiber of the kind of material out of which a party bolter could have been made. From the bottom of his heart he despised a craven. By an instinct that was unerring he fathomed the purposes of adversaries while he himself remained unfathomable. His prudence told him when to speak and when to remain silent, and Illinois has never known such another master of political strategy as he. With trusted friends he was as open as the day,—frank and ingenuous as truth itself,—but to the unfriendly, who had no right to know his plans, he was a riddle deeper and more mysterious than the Sphinx.

This man possessed a magnetism so strong that it often obliterated the lines of party and drew him personal support from those who disagreed with his political creed. His friends loved him with a devotion

stronger, even, than the sanctions of party fealty. And why did they love him? They loved him because they knew he was great-hearted and true; because they admired his exuberant strength and manliness; because they knew he was upright and would keep faith with them to the end; that he would never show his back to a political enemy, and that if exigencies required it he would go down with them, unflinchingly, into common disaster and ruin.

The energy of Gov. Tanner was of the kind that “distanced expedition.” It was too great, in fact, for any human frame to support, and its restless beatings at last wore out and destroyed the matchless fabric of his physical constitution. His capacity for labor was phenomenal. When his clerks and assistants were all ready to fall with exhaustion he seemed ready to begin anew the work of the day; and his will and courage were shown no less by the temerity with which he faced overwhelming odds than by the serenity with which he met reverses and disasters. Nothing ever daunted that fierce and imperious spirit, which

bowed only to death. Political battles he might lose, but he never lost heart. All the principalities and powers of darkness could not have struck panic into that dauntless soul or wrung from his proud lips a craven word. In the midst of pain and disaster, dreams of health and success still cheered him on. When the last square was broken, he was ready, like Cambronne at Waterloo, to hurl the word of supreme defiance at the coalitions which might crush but could never conquer him.

Had the days of this man's prime fallen upon some great national crisis he might have proven one of the nation's greatest heroes. His mettle and endurance were of the kind that could carry "a letter to Garcia," and bring Garcia himself, if need be, back on his shoulders. It is needless to say that only disease or death could keep such a man permanently down.

John R. Tanner was thoroughly informed upon the plain facts and the philosophies of common life, and his fund of information upon the resources and products of the different parts of the United States

surpassed that of any man I ever knew. Like all brave and forceful men, he was gentle and kind and loving to those who had the right to claim his protection. His delight was to make those who depended upon him happy. The weak found in him a helpful friend. His purse was open to the needy, and no cause which embraced the public welfare ever found him a laggard. In hundreds of instances he succored those who could give neither money nor favor nor political influence in return. To no other grave in Illinois will so many men and women come in after days and say, "Here lies the best friend I ever had."

But now his combats, his trials, his victories and his defeats are past and gone. He has said a long farewell to "the plumed troop and the big wars that make ambition virtue." The spirit-stirring drum calls him no more to battle. Whither he has gone calumny cannot pursue, and all the shafts of envy, malice and revenge fall broken and harmless upon the threshold of his open grave. The brow knit by anxiety and carking care has relaxed in that sweet

smile of death which we have to-day beheld upon his peaceful face. It may be that the veiled and mysterious messenger which summoned our friend hence has been kinder to him than we know—kinder, perhaps, to him than to us. Let us hope that the summons which brings such anguish to the living has brought to him the peace that passeth understanding. And while naught can disturb the serenity which he has found in death, so nothing can take from us, the living, the treasure he leaves us in the memory of his heroic and manly life,—the unfading record of a dauntless soul, which held every compact of life inviolate and bowed only at the portals of the tomb.

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